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**HERSETH SANDLIN PRESENTS SOUTH DAKOTAN WITH FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S
HIGHEST ARTISTIC HONOR**

National Heritage Fellowship Awarded to LeRoy Graber of Freeman

Washington, DC {September 23, 2009}- Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin presented LeRoy Graber from Freeman with a National Heritage Fellowship, the federal government's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. At a ceremony on Capitol Hill, Graber received this lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for basket weaving.

"I congratulate LeRoy for this tremendous achievement in recognition of his artistic contributions and commitment to educating younger generations," Rep. Herseth Sandlin said. "South Dakota is fortunate to have someone like LeRoy who values his heritage and shares his craft with his community."

LeRoy Graber learned to weave willow baskets at the age of ten from his grandfather Jacob Graber, who came to the Dakota Territory from the Ukraine in 1874. Prior to settling in the Ukraine, the German Swiss Mennonites emigrated to Alsace-Lorraine and Poland, seeking religious freedom and exemption from conscription into the military. These settlers carried with them their crafts, foodways, stories, and agricultural knowledge.

For more than 25 years, Graber displayed his craft at the annual Schmeckfest (tasting festival) in Freeman, South Dakota. Through the years, willows, often used by basket makers, have gradually disappeared, diminishing the craft in this region. Realizing the importance of this artistic tradition, Graber says, "I can feel the heritage of my ancestors in my hands." To continue his family's tradition, LeRoy and his son, Kim, have planted acres of willows on their farm. Graber also teaches basket making at local schools in South Dakota and North Dakota.

Graber is also known locally for his award-winning dairy farm.

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